

BUSTER¹

BY KATHARINE HOLLAND BROWN

From Scribner's Magazine

LUCIEN, Mrs. Bellamy's impeccable chauffeur, brought me home from Mrs. Bellamy's bridge that green-gold summer afternoon of 1914. Looking down from the cliff road, all Gloucester Harbor was a floor of rippled amethyst. When we turned into the forest drive the air breathed deep of pine fragrance, heady as new wine.

"How few people are driving to-day, Lucien! Yet it's so perfect—"

"One driver approaches, mademoiselle." Lucien's solid gray shape bore hard on the wheel. The big car swerved, shot half-way up the bank. I screamed. Past us like a streak of white lightning tore a headlong white monster, muffler cut out, siren whooping. Its huge wheels grazed our hubs; with a roar, it shot round the curve, plunged down the steep grade toward Gloucester, and vanished. Its shriek rang back to us like the shriek of a lost soul.

"Lucien! That car must have been making eighty miles an hour!"

"Mademoiselle speaks truth." Lucien, frankly shaken, took off his cap and wiped a very damp brow. "It is the car of the great Doctor Lake, he who is guest of Madame Hallowell, at Greenacres."

"Doctor Lake! That stodgy old specialist!" I was a bit shaken myself. "Nonsense. He never ventures out of a crawl."

"Pardon, mademoiselle. It is the car of Doctor Lake.

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But at the wheel sat not monsieur the doctor. Instead, there sat, and drove"—here Lucien forgot himself completely—"that demon boy."

"Buster!" I groaned. For there was only one demon boy on all Cape Ann, and that was my second cousin Isabella O'Brien's only son, Richard Parke O'Brien, rechristened Buster since the days of his tempestuous infancy. Isabella (born Sears and Brattle Street, but she ran away and married Octavius O'Brien, descendant of an unknown race, at eighteen, and has lived ever since in the wilds of Oklahoma)—Isabella, I say, had sent her child to visit Aunt Charlotte and myself, while she and her Octavius went camping in the Yosemite. From her letters we had inferred that she needed a vacation from her Civic League work. Later, we came to realize that her base secret aim had been to win a vacation from Buster. What we two sedate Back Bay spinsters had endured from that unspeakable child!

Octavius O'Brien is a large, emphatic man with large, emphatic ideas as to the rearing of children. Buster once summarized his father's method in a few simple words.

"Here in New England, when I want to learn how to do anything, you and Aunt Charlotte say: 'Dear me, Richard, wait till you grow up. Then you'll understand.' Down in Oklahoma, dad just gives me a check and says: 'Go to it.'"

Such eclecticism bears startling fruits. The maddening thing about Buster's activities was that his blackest crimes, once sifted down, proved not to be crimes at all. Merely the by-products of his inquiring disposition. Although, to quote Aunt Charlotte, if your house is burnt down over your head, it matters little to you whether it was fired for malice or from a scientific desire to see how long it would take to burn.

To-day, as we drove on, I looked back on the summer. As a rule, our months at the shore are compact of slow and tranquil days, but this season had fled past like a demented moving-picture film. Buster had arrived at 9 A. M. the 8th of June. By noon he had made his presence felt. During the next five days he took the gas-range apart, to see how it worked, and put it together

again, but inaccurately, so that it blew up and all but annihilated a perfectly good cook. I had to raise Louisiana's wages three dollars a week. He drained all the water out of the fountain pool, to see how long it would take to refill it; then, at sight of a wayfaring organ-grinder he rushed away, to bribe the man to open up his instrument and let him see how its harmonious inwards worked. Thus, he left nine fat, venerable goldfish to flop themselves to a miserable end. To be sure, he sniffed audibly at dinner that night and almost declined dessert; which didn't bring back aunt's beloved Chinese carp, alas! He tried to teach Gulliver, the Leonards' Great Dane, to do German police-dog stunts. Gulliver, who is young, obedient, and muddle-headed, took his training seriously to heart and made breath-taking leaps at the Leonards' gardener's throat, to the up-blown pride of both Buster and the gardener. Unhappily, he saw fit to show off his new accomplishment on an irascible New York banker, to whom Commodore Leonard was trying his best to sell his early Pullman place at Beverly Farms. As Buster hotly declared, if the banker hadn't squealed and acted such a sissy, Gulliver would have stopped with a mere snap at his lapel. But his cries so excited the poor pup that by the time the horrified commodore came to his aid most of the banker's raiment was in tatters, to say nothing of his dignity. Commodore Leonard lost his one chance of the year to unload that white elephant of a house. At that, he congratulated himself because the banker didn't sue him for damages.

Subdued and chastened, Buster took himself off to the harbor to seek diversion among the ancient mariners who had already found in him a stimulating audience. He spent, I judge, a pleasant afternoon. He rode back on the Magnolia 'bus just at dinner-time. He did not return alone. Proudly he strode up the steps, one eye cocked over his shoulder at the bland and tarry skipper who swaggered, all too jovially, behind. Eagerly he ran to the palsied Aunt Charlotte.

"Aunt Charlotte, this is my friend, Captain Harrigan, of the *Lottie Foster*. The captain has come to dinner and to spend the evening, and he's promised to tell us

all his adventures and draw the plans for my racing yacht, when I get one, and teach me how to make her torpedo-proof and—and everything! Cap Harrigan, meet Aunt Charlotte!"

Well, as Aunt Charlotte and I agreed later, we were bound and helpless. The child was so brimful of glad hospitality. You could n't strike him in the face by rebuffing his friend. But oh, the hours that followed! As Louisiana put it later, the genman was n't plumb drunk, but he cert'ny was happy drunk. The instant dinner was ended Aunt Charlotte fled up-stairs, locked her door, and pushed the bureau against it. I stayed on deck, a quaking Casabianca, till 11 P. M. Then, by way of a mild suggestion, I turned down the lights; and Captain Harrigan, now in mellow tears at the reminiscences of his own boyhood, kissed my hands and took a fervent leave.

"But Richard, child! The man was intoxicated! Disgustingly intoxicated!"

"Gosh, was he? Well, he was bully and interesting, anyhow. Look at all those sailors' knots he's taught me. And the story he told about crossing the equator the first time, and the one about the admiral who was always three sheets to the wind and would n't tie his shoe-strings—what does three sheets to the wind mean, anyhow? And he's showed me how to read a compass and all about sextants and transits, too. Gee, I bet I could steer a dreadnought, after what he's taught me to-night."

"He certainly was full of information. But don't invite any more drunken sailors to the house, dear. Bring your friends home whenever you wish, but make sure first that they're sober."

"Well, I will. Though I kind o' hate to ask 'em."

With that I let the matter drop. You could not blame the child. Back of every calamity that he brought upon us lay his ravenous curiosity, his frantic longing to know how the world was made and ruled. But to-day was different. No hunger for knowledge could warrant a boy of fifteen in seizing the sacrosanct car of the most famous of Boston specialists, and going joy-riding down the Gloucester hills. Buster should be seriously rebuked.

Incidentally, I'd been playing bridge all afternoon

with two stern dowagers and one irritable maiden lady, all crack players, while I'm a hopeless amateur. I had on a tea-rose crêpe de chine and the waitress had spilled coffee on it. Further, I was wearing brand-new patent-leather slippers. Yes, Buster would receive his full deserts.

Buster pranced home at dusk, afire with triumph from his crested red head to his comically massive young feet. Pallid and grave, Aunt Charlotte and I confronted him on the piazza.

"H'lo, Cousin Edith. Say, is dinner ready? Cracky, I could eat a whole barbecue!"

"Richard! Where is Doctor Lake's car?"

Buster gasped slightly, but his jauntiness never flinched.

"Over at Mrs. Hallowell's garage, of course."

"You have just left it there. Richard, don't you realize what a lawless thing you have done? To take another person's car without permission—"

"I did too have permission!" Buster's red crest reared. His black eyes flamed. "I had her opened up, and was studying the engine—gee, some peach!—and I told the doctor's chauffeur that I'd bet him a box of Gibraltars I could take that car clear to Doctor Lake's Boston office and back in two hours and not get pinched. And he said, 'I'm from Saint Joe, son. You gotta show me.' So I jumped aboard, and I'd beat it down the drive before he could say boo. And I made it in one hour and fifty-seven minutes, though I had to waste ten minutes, and a dollar besides, on the doctor's mutt of a doorman—making him understand why he must sign his name to a card saying I'd reported there at five sharp. The big dummy, I don't believe the real reason has dawned on him yet. But you oughter seen that chauffeur wilt when I whizzled her in, two minutes ago!"

"I feel wilted myself. When I think of the apologies I must make to Doctor Lake—"

"Apologies? What for? He ought to be delighted. It was a corking speed test for his car. Down that stem-winder cliff, let me tell you, she just naturally hung on by her eyebrows."

"Richard, the chauffeur did not mean to give you permission. You know that."

"W-well. What if he did n't?"

"Richard, you are inexcusable." Aunt Charlotte ruffled her feathers and dashed into the fray. Whereat Richard exploded.

"Gee, ain't it fierce? Ain't it, now! How's a fellow to learn about cars and engines and things if folks won't ever give him a chance to try 'em out? And I've got to find out how to do things and make things and run things; I've got to know!"

His solid fists clinched; his voice skittered comically from a bass bellow to an angry treble crow. I choked. He was so exactly like a pin-feathered young Shanghai rooster, hotly contending his right to live his own life, against two glum, elderly hens. But that didn't deter me from marching him over to Madam Hallowell's later.

"Nonsense, my dear Miss Edith!" Thus Doctor Lake, just a bit too Olympian in large white waistcoat and eminent calm. "It was my chauffeur's doing. He will answer to me. I beg you, give the matter no more thought."

None the less, in his bland eye lurked a yearning to seize on Buster and boil him in oil. Buster saw that look.

"Grown-up folks are so darn stingy!" he mused bitterly as we went away. He aimed a vicious kick at the box hedge. "You'd think any man would be glad to let a fellow take his car to pieces and study it out, then test it for speed and endurance, 'specially when the fellow has never owned anything better than a measly little runabout in all his life. But no. There he stands, all diked out like a cold boiled owl, with his eyes rolled up and his lip rolled out—'My chauffeur will answer to me.' When, all the time, he'd lick the hide off me if he just dasted. Old stuffed shirt!"

"You need not speak so disrespectfully—"

"I would n't—if folks was n't so disrespectful to me." His eyes began to flash again, his sullen under-lip to quiver. "'Learn it all,' they tell you. 'Investigate every useful art.' That's what everybody pours down

your throat, teachers, and relations, an' all the rest of 'em. How do they s'pose I'm going to learn about things if they lock everything up away from me? And I've got to find out about things; I've got to know!"

I did n't say anything. What was the use? You might as well scold an active young dynamo for wanting to spark. But mild little Aunt Charlotte was quite sputtery, for her.

"Isabella and her Octavius have reared their child to have the tastes of a common mechanic. It is too ridiculous. Richard needs to understand problems of finance, not of cogs and axle-grease. If only American parents would adopt the German methods! *They* teach their children what is best for them to know. They don't permit their young people to waste time and money on wild-goose flights."

"N-no." I shivered a little. For some reason, the annual percentage of school-boy suicides in Prussia flashed through my mind. When you multiplied that by a nation—"But perhaps it's as well that we give our boys more rope."

"To hang themselves with?" sniffed Aunt Charlotte. I subsided.

So did Buster, for some weeks—weeks so peaceful, they were all but sinister. Across the ocean, a hare-brained student murdered a reigning duke and his duchess. It made the newspapers very unpleasant reading for several days. Across the harbor, the yacht-club gave the most charming dinner dance of the year. Down East Gloucester way, a lank and close-mouthed youth from Salem had set up a shack of a hangar and was giving brief and gaspy flights to the summer populace at five dollars a head. Whereat Buster gravitated to East Gloucester, as the needle to the pole. He bribed Louisiana to give him his breakfast at seven; he snatched a mouthful of lunch in the village; he seldom reached home before dusk.

"Richard, you are not spending your allowance in aeroplane rides?"

"Say, listen, Cousin Edie. Where'd I get the coin for five-dollar jitney trips? I'm overdrawn sixty dollars

on my allowance now, all on account of that beanery down the harbor—”

“The beanery? You have n’t eaten sixty dollars’ worth of beans!”

Buster jumped. He turned a sheepish red.

“Gosh, I forgot. Why—well, you see, the boss at that joint has just put in the grandest big new oven ever—iron and cement and a steam-chamber and everything. One day last week he had to go to Boston, and I asked him to let me fire it for him. It was the most interesting thing, to watch that steam-gauge hop up, only she hopped too fast. So I shut off the drafts, but I was n’t quick enough. There were forty-eight pounds of beans in the roaster, and they burnt up, crocks and all, and—well, between us, we hadn’t put enough water in the boiler. So she sort of—er—well, she blew up. I wired dad for the money, and he came across by return mail. Dad’s a pretty good sport. But I ’ll bet he does n’t loosen up again before Labor Day.”

Well, I was sorry for the baker. But Buster, penniless, was far less formidable than Buster with money in his purse.

The green and golden days flowed on. The North Shore was its loveliest. But the newspapers persisted in being unpleasant. Serbian complications, amazing pronunciamientos, rumors that were absurd past credence; then, appalling, half-believed, the winged horror-tale of Belgium. Then, in a trice, our bridge-tables were pushed back, our yacht dinners forgotten. Frowning, angrily bewildered, we were all making hurried trips to the village and heckling the scared young telegraph-operator with messages and money that must be cabled to marooned kinsfolk at Liverpool or Hamburg or Ostend. “This moment! Can’t you *see* how important it is?” A day or so more and we were all buying shoes and clothes for little children and rushing our first boggled first-aid parcels to the wharf. And, in the midst of all that dazed hurly, up rose Mrs. John B. Connable. Aglow with panicky triumph, she flung wide the gates of Dawn Towers, her spandy-new futurist palace, to the first bazaar of the Belgian relief!

As one impious damsel put it, Belgium's extremity was Mrs. Connable's opportunity. Seven weary years, with the grim patience of stalwart middle age and seventeen millions, has Mrs. John B. labored to mount the long, ice-coated stair that leads from a Montana cow-camp to the thresholds of Beacon Hill. Six cruel seasons have beheld her falter and slip back. But on this, the seventh, by this one soaring scramble, she gained the top-most gliddery round. A bazaar for the Belgians? For once, something new. And Dawn Towers, despite its two-fisted châtelaine, was said to be a poet's dream.

Well, we went. All of us. Even to Madam Hallowell, in lilac chiffon and white fox fur, looking like the Wicked Fairy done by Drian; even to Aunt Charlotte, wearing the Curtice emeralds, her sainted nose held at an angle that suggested burnt flannel. I'll say for Mrs. Connable that she did it extremely well. The great, beautiful house was thrown open from turret to foundation-stone. Fortune-tellers lurked in gilded tents; gay contadinas sang and sold their laces—the prettiest girls from the Folies at that; Carli's band, brought from New York to play fox-trots; cleverest surprise of all, the arrival, at five o'clock, of a lordly limousine conveying three heaven-born "principals," a haughty young director in puttees, a large camera. Would Mrs. Connable's guests consent to group themselves upon the beach as background for the garden-party scene of "*The Princess Patricia*"—with Angela Meadow, from the Metropolitan, as the Princess, if you please, and Lou-Galuppi himself as the villain?

Mrs. Connable's guests would. All the world loves a camera, I reflected, as I observed Madam Hallowell drift languidly to the centre-front, the chill Cadwalladers from Westchester drape themselves unwittingly but firmly in the foreground, the D'Arcy Joneses stand laughingly holding hands in the very jaws of the machine. But Doctor Lake was the strategist of the hour. Chuckling in innocent mirth, he chatted with the radiant Angela until the director's signal brought the villain swaggering from the side-lines; then, gracefully dismayed, he stepped back at least six inches. If the camera caught Angela

at all, the doctor would be there—every eminent inch of him.

“Ready—camera!”

The joyous chatter stilled. On every face fell smug sweetness, as a chrism. Clickety-click, click-click—

Then, amazingly, another sound mingled with that magic tick, rose, drowned it to silence—the high, snarling whine of a swift-coming aeroplane.

“Keep your places, please! Eyes right!”

Nobody heard him. Swung as on one pivot, the garden-party turned toward the harbor, mazed, agape. Across that silver water, flying so low its propeller flashed through diamond spray, straight toward the crowd on the beach it came—the aeroplane from East Gloucester.

“There, I *knew* he’d butt in just at the wrong minute! I ordered him for six, sharp!” Mrs. Connable’s voice rang hotly through the silence. “Hi, there! Land farther down the beach; we ain’t ready for you. Go on, I tell you! Oh, oh, my gracious goodness me! He’s a-headin’ right on top of us—”

That was all anybody heard. For in that second, pandemonium broke. The great, screaming bird drove down upon us with the speed of light, the blast of a howitzer shell. Whir-r-rip! The big marquee collapsed like a burst balloon. Crash! One landing-wheel grazed the band-stand; it tipped over like a fruit-basket, spilling out shrieking men. Through a dizzy mist I saw the garden-party, all its pose forgot, scuttle like terrified ants. I saw the scornful Cadwalladers leap behind an infant pine. I saw D’Arcy Jones seize his wedded wife by her buxom shoulders and fling her in front of him, a living shield. I saw—can I believe?—the august Doctor Lake, pop-eyed and shrieking, gallop headlong across the beach and burrow madly in the low-tide sands. I saw—but how could my spinning brain set down those thousand spectacles?

However, one eye saw it all—and set it down in cold, relentless truth—the camera. True to his faith, that camera-man kept on grinding, even when the monster all but grazed his head.

Then, swifter even than that goblin flight, it was all over. With a deafening thud, the aeroplane grounded on a bed of early asters. Out of the observer's seat straddled a lean, tall shape—the aviator. From the pilot's sheath leaped a white-faced, stammering boy. White to his lips; but it was the pallor of a white flame, the light of a glory past all words.

"H'lo, Cousin Edie! See me bring her across the harbor? Some little pilot!" Then, as if he saw for the first that gurgling multitude, the wrecked tent, the overturned band-stand: "Gee, that last puff of wind was more than I'd counted on. But she landed like thistledown, just the same. Just thistledown!"

I'll pass over the next few hours. And why attempt to chronicle the day that followed? Bright and early, I set forth to scatter olive-branches like leaves of Vallombrosa. Vain to portray the icy calm of the Misses Cadwallader, the smiling masks which hid the rage of the D'Arcy Joneses. Hopeless to depict the bland, amused aplomb of Doctor Lake. To hear him graciously disclaim all chagrin was to doubt the word of one's own vision. Could I have dreamed the swoop of that mighty bird, the screech of a panic-stricken fat' man galloping like a mad hippopotamus for the shelter of the surf?

As for Mrs. John B. Connable—hell hath no fury like the woman who has fought and bled for years to mount that treacherous flight; who, gaining the last giddy step, feels, in one sick heartbeat, the ladder give way from under. I went from that tearful and belligerent empress feeling as one who has gazed into the dusk fires of the Seventh Ledge.

"We'll have to give a dinner for her, and ask the Cadwalladers and Cousin Sue Curtice and the Salem Bronsons. That will pacify her, if anything can." Thus Aunt Charlotte, with irate gloom. There are times when Aunt Charlotte's deep spiritual nature betrays a surprising grasp of mundane things.

"Especially if we can get that French secretary, and Madam Hallowell. Now I'm off to soothe the aviator. Where did I put my check-book?"

The aviator stood at his hangar door, winding a coil

of wire. His lean body looked feather-light in its taut khaki; under the leathern helmet, his narrow, dark eyes glinted like the eyes of a falcon hooded against the sun. Blank, unsmiling, he heard my maunder of explanation. Somehow his cool aloofness daunted me a bit. But when I fumbled for my checkbook, he flashed alive.

"Money? What for? Because the kid scraped an aileron? Forget it. I ain't puttin' up any holler. He's fetched an' carried for me all summer. I'm ownin' him, if it comes down to that."

"But Richard had no right to damage your machine—"

"Well, he never meant to. That squally gust put him off tack, else he'd 'a' brought her down smooth's a whistle. For, take it from me, he's a flier born. Hand, eye, balance, feel, he's got 'em all. And he's patient and speedy and cautious and reckless all at once. And he knows more about engines than I do, this minute. There's not a motor made that can faze him. Say, he's one whale of a kid, all right. If his folks would let me, I'd take him on as flyin' partner. Fifty-fifty at that."

I stiffened a trifle.

"You are very kind. But such a position would hardly be fitting—"

"For a swell kid like him?" Under his helmet those keen eyes narrowed to twin points of light. "Likely not. You rich hill folks can't be expected to know your own kids. You'll send him to Harvard, then chain him up in a solid-mahogany office, with a gang of solid-mahogany clerks to kowtow to him, and teach him to make money. When he might be flyin' with me. Flyin'—with me!" His voice shook on a hoarse, exultant note. He threw back his head; from under the leathern casque his eyes flamed out over the world of sea and sky, his conquered province. "When he might be a flier, the biggest flier the world has ever seen. Say, can you beat it? *Can you beat it?*"

His rudeness was past excuse. Yet I stood before him in the oddest guilty silence. Finally—

"But please let me pay you. That broken strut—"

"Nothing doing, sister. Forget it." He bent to his work. "Pay me? No matter if my plane did get a knock, it was worth it. Just to see that fat guy in white pants hot-foot it for deep water! Yes, I'm paid. Good-by."

Then, to that day of shards and ashes, add one more recollection—Buster's face when Aunt Charlotte laid it upon him that he should never again enter that hangar door.

"Aunt Charlotte! For Pete's sake, have a heart! I've got that plane eatin' out of my hand. If that plaguy cat's-paw had n't sprung up—"

"You will not go to East Gloucester again, Richard. That ends it." Aunt Charlotte swept from the room.

"Gee!" Buster's wide eyes filled. He slumped into the nearest chair. "Say, Cousin Edie! Ain't I got one friend left on earth?"

"Now, Richard—"

"Can't you see what I'm tryin' to put over? I don't expect Aunt Charlotte to see. She's a pippin, all right, but that solid-ivory dome of hers—"

"Richard!"

"But you're different. You are n't so awful old. You ought to understand that a fellow just has to know about things—cars, ships, aeroplanes, motors, everything!"

"But—"

"Now, Cousin Edith, I'm not stringin' you. I'm dead in earnest. I'm not tryin' to bother anybody; I'm just tryin' to learn what I've got to learn." He leaped up, gripped my arm; his passionate boy voice shrilled; he was droll and pitiful and insolent all in a breath. "No, sirree, I ain't bluffin', not for a cent. Believe me, Cousin Edith, us fellows have got to learn how everything works, and learn it quick. I tell you, we've got to know!"

Well. . . . All this was the summer of 1914. Three years ago. Three years and eight months ago, to be exact. Nowadays, I don't wear tea-rose crêpe frocks nor slim French slippers. Our government's daily Hints for Paris run more to coarse blue denim and doux woollen

hose and clumping rubber boots. My once-lily hands clasp a scrubbing-brush far oftener than a hand at bridge. And I rise at five-thirty and gulp my scalding coffee in the hot, tight galley of Field Hospital 64, then set to work. For long before the dawn they come, that endless string of ambulances, with their terrible and precious freight. Then it's baths and food and swift, tense minutes in the tiny "theatre," and swifter, tenser seconds when we and the orderlies hurry through dressings and bandagings, while the senior nurse toils like a Turk alongside and bosses us meanwhile like a slave-driver. Every day my heart is torn open in my breast for the pain of my children, my poor, big, helpless, broken children. Every night, when I slip by to take a last peep at their sleepy, contented faces, my heart is healed for me again. Then I stumble off to our half-partitioned slit and throw myself on my bunk, tired to my last bone, happy to the core of my soul. But day by day the work heaps up. Every cot is full, every tent overflowing. We're short of everything, beds, carbolic, dressings, food. And yesterday, at dusk, when we were all fagged to exhaustion, there streamed down a very flood of wounded, eight ambulance-loads, harvest of a bombed munitions depot.

"We have n't an inch of room."

"We've got to make room." Doctor Lake, sweating, dog-tired, swaying on his feet from nine unbroken hours at the operating-table, took command. "Take my hut; it'll hold four at a pinch. You nurses will give up your cubby-hole? Thought so. Plenty hot water, Octave? Bring 'em along."

They brought them along. Every stretcher, every bunk, every crack was crowded now. Then came the whir of a racing motor. One more ambulance plunged up the sodden road.

"Ah! *Grand blessé!*" murmured old Octave.

"*Grand blessé!* And not a blanket left, even. Put him in the coal-hole," groaned the head nurse.

"Nix on the coal-hole." Thus the muddy young driver, hauling out the stretcher with its long, moveless shape. "This is the candy kid—hear me? Our crack scout. Escadrille 32."

"Escadrille 32?" The number held no meaning for me. Yet I pushed nearer. *Grand blessé*, indeed, that lax, pulseless body, that shattered flesh, that blood and mire. I bent closer. Red hair, shining and thick, the red that always goes with cinnamon freckles. A clean-cut, ashen young face, a square jaw, a stubborn, boyish chin with a deep-cleft dimple.

Then my heart stopped short. The room whirled round me.

"Buster!" I cried out. "You naughty, darling little scamp! So you got your way, after all. You ran off from school, and joined the escadrille—oh, sonny-boy, don't you hear me? Listen! Listen!"

The gaunt face did not stir. Only that ashy whiteness seemed to grow yet whiter.

"We'll do our best, Miss Preston. Go away now, dear." The head nurse put me gently back. I knew too well what her gentleness meant.

"But Doctor Lake can save him! Doctor Lake can pull him through!"

"Doctor Lake is worn out. We'll have to manage without him."

"Don't you believe it!" I flamed. Then I, the greenest, meekest slavey in the service, dashed straight to the operating-room, and gripped Doctor Lake by both wrists and jerked him bodily off the bench where he crouched, a sick, lubberly heap, blind with fatigue.

"No, you sha'n't stop to rest. Not yet!" I stormed at him. Somehow I dragged him down the ward, to my boy's side. At sight of that deathlike face, the limp, shivering man pulled himself together with all his weary might.

"I'll do my level best, Miss Edith. Go away, now, that's a good girl."

I went away and listened to the ambulance-driver. He was having an ugly bullet scratch on his arm tied up. He was not a regular field-service man, but a young Y. M. C. A. helper who had taken the place of a driver shot down that noon.

"Well, you see, that kid took the air two hours ago to locate the battery that's been spilling shells into our

munitions station. He spotted it, and two others besides. Naturally, they spotted him. He scooted for home, with a shrapnel wound in his shoulder, and made a bad landing three miles back of the lines, and broke his leg and whacked his head. Luckily I was n't a hundred yards away. I got him aboard my car and gave him first aid and started to bring him straight over here. Would he stand for that? Not Buddy. 'You'll take me to headquarters first, to report,' says he. 'So let her out.'

"No use arguing. I let her out. We reported at headquarters, three miles out of our way, then started here. Two miles back, a shell struck just ahead and sent a rock the size of a paving-brick smack against our engine. The car stopped, dead. Did that faze the kid? Not so you could notice it. 'You hoist me on the seat and let me get one hand on the wheel,' says he, cool's a cucumber. 'There is n't a car made but will jump through hoops for me.' Go she did. With her engine knocked galley west, mind you, and him propped up, chirk as a cherub, with his broken leg and his smashed shoulder, and a knock on his head that would 'a' stopped his clock if he'd had any brains to jolt. Skill? He drove that car like a racer. She only hit the high places. Pluck? He wrote it.

"We were n't fifty yards from the hospital when he crumpled down, and I grabbed him. Hemorrhage, I guess. I sure do hope they pull him through. But—I don't believe—"

Soon a very dirty-faced brigadier-general, whom I used to meet at dances long ago, came and sat down on a soap-box and held my hands and tried to comfort me, so gently and so patiently, the poor, kind, blundering dear. Most of his words just buzzed and glimmered round me. But one thought stuck in my dull brain.

"This is n't your boy's first service to his country, Miss Edith. He has been with the escadrille only a month, but he has brought down three enemy planes, and his scouting has been invaluable. He's a wonder, anyhow. So are all our flying boys. They tell me that the German youngsters make such good soldiers because

they're trained to follow orders blindfold. All very well when it comes to following a bayonet charge over the top. But the escadrille—that's another story. Take our boys, brought up to sail their own boats and run their own cars and chance any fool risk in sight. Couple up that impudence, that fearlessness, that splendid curiosity, and you've got a fighting-machine that not only fights but wins. All the drilled, stolid forces in creation can't beat back that headlong young spirit. If—”

He halted, stammering.

“If—we can't keep him with us, you must remember that he gave his best to his country, and his best was a noble gift. Be very glad that you could help your boy prepare himself to bestow it. You and his parents gave him his outdoor life and his daring sports and his fearless outlook, and his uncurbed initiative. You helped him build himself, mind and body, to flawless powers and to instant decisions. To-day came his chance to give his greatest service. No matter what comes now, you—you have your royal memory.”

But I could not hear any more. I cried out that I didn't want any royal memories, I wanted my dear, bad, self-willed little boy. The general got up then and limped away and stood and looked out of the window.

I sat and waited. I kept on waiting—minutes on gray minutes, hours on hours.

Then a nurse grasped my shoulders, and tried to tell me something. I heard her clearly, but I couldn't string her words together to make meaning. Finally, she drew me to my feet and led me back to the operating-room.

There stood Doctor Lake. He was leaning against the wall and wiping his face on a piece of gauze. He came straight to me and put out both big, kind hands.

“Tell me. You needn't try to make it easy—”

“There, there, Miss Edith. There's nothing to tell. Look for yourself.”

Gray-lipped, whiter than ashes, straight and moveless as a young knight in marble effigy, lay my boy. But a shadow pulse flickered in that bound temple, the cheek I kissed was warm.

“No,” said Doctor Lake very softly. “He won't die.

He's steel and whipcord, that youngster. Heaven be praised, you can't kill his sort with a hatchet."

He leaned down, gave Buster a long, searching look. His puffy, fagged face twisted with bewilderment, then broke into chuckles of astonishment and delight.

"Well, on my word and honor! I've just this moment recognized him. This *blessé* is the imp of Satan who used to steal my car up the North Shore. He's the chap who steered that confounded aeroplane into the garden-party. . . . I've always sworn that, let me once lay hands on that young scalawag, I'd lick the tar out of him!"

"Well, here's your chance," snivelled I.

He did not hear me. He had stooped again over Buster. Again he was peering into that still face. Over his own face came a strange look, mirthful, then deep with question, profoundly tender; then, flashing through, a gleam of amazing and most piteous jealousy, the bitter, comic jealousy of the most famous of all middle-aged American surgeons for insolent, fool-hardy, glorious youth.

Then he turned and went away, a big, dead-tired, shambling figure. And in that instant my boy's heavy eyes lifted and stared at me. Slowly in them awoke a drowsy sparkle.

"Hello, Cousin Edith. When did you blow in?"

I didn't try to speak. I looked past him at Doctor Lake, now plodding from the room. Buster's eyes followed mine. Over his face came a smile of heaven's own light.

"Old stuffed shirt," sighed Buster with exquisite content. He turned his gaunt young head on the pillow; he tucked a brawny fist under his cheek. Before I could speak he had slipped away, far on a sea of dreams.